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BOOK REVIEW

Migrant Deaths in the Arizona Desert: La vida no vale nada. Raquel Rubio-Goldsmith, Celestino Fernández, Jessie K. Finch, and Aracelia Masterson-Algar, eds., Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016, 302 pp.

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The number of undocumented migrants dying and disappearing while crossing into the United States has increased dramatically over the past 20 years. Contributing to this rise are U.S. government initiatives that have pushed undocumented border crossers into hostile and desolate desert terrain by intensifying enforcement at more urban crossings. *Migrant Deaths in the Arizona Desert* makes manifest global dynamics and local experiences surrounding this increase in death and disappearance through attention to the traces of those who never made it across the desert. Featuring scholars, artists, and practitioners who are long-term residents of the Arizona–Sonora border region, the volume accounts for and responds to migrant deaths from a wide array of disciplinary perspectives, ranging from forensic anthropology to history and folklore studies.

Published nearly eight years after the conference that brought these authors

together, this edited volume is a rich time capsule documenting a unique convergence of voices. Each chapter explores the disquieting relationship between evidence and absence that surrounds migrant deaths, ranging from Celestino Fernandez and Jessie K. Finch's analysis of death themes within regional folks songs to Anna Ochoa O'Leary's interviews with recently deported women navigating the gendered gap in rising smuggling fees. The fact that smuggling fees continue to rise in the first days of the Trump presidency, when the discursive importance of the U.S.–Mexico border is as high as ever, is also a testament to the timeliness of this book.

The diversity of voices that make up this volume is perhaps its greatest contribution, offering both disciplinary breadth and topical granularity. The disparate analytical frameworks and aesthetic approaches of each chapter, however, also constitute somewhat of a drawback. Someone who picks up the volume and reads a couple of chapters in no particular order, as I did the first time, might come away feeling disoriented. The editors gracefully resolve this concern in the introductory chapter, which outlines the volume's organization into five "stations of the cross." As the editors suggest, journeying through the book chapter by

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chapter is itself a kind of poetic pilgrimage of remembrance and retelling. Moving between the evidence of death and its affective imprint, the volume as a whole grasps at various strategies to account for the incomplete traces of missing migrants.

The first two stations, “The Makings of History” and “Crossings” present readers with both historical and contemporary testimonies of occupying the border space, including oral histories conducted with long-term residents of the border region and interviews conducted with recently deported migrants. In this section, Claudio Lomnitz’s contribution conceptually frames the rest of the volume from the viewpoint of Mexican politics, a perspective that is too often overlooked when talking about undocumented migration to the United States. Presaging the massive popular response on both sides of the border to the 2014 disappearance of 43 students from Ayotzinapa, Lomnitz explores the biopolitical disjuncture between corroded social welfare institutions that leave the most vulnerable to die and the contemporary uptick in organizing around issues of disappearance in Mexico as NGOs and activist journalists try to keep up with the body count. This broader framing lays bare the stakes of the other chapters in this section that draw on oral history, survey methodology, and ethnography to illustrate how those migrating are both devalued as labor and rendered lucrative for the human smuggling industry.

While the volume is not explicitly framed in the language of medical anthropology, the third station, “Found Remains, Missing Graves” is perhaps the

most compelling for medical anthropology audiences. The section’s first two chapters, written by sociologist Daniel Martinez and forensic pathologist Bruce O. Parks and colleagues, discuss the work of the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (PCOME) in Arizona. This is the office responsible for cataloguing the causes of death imprinted on bodies found in the desert that fill over-burdened refrigerators. Cultural anthropologist Robin Reineke then closes the section describing her work to connect relatives of the missing who have filed missing-persons reports with records produced by the PCOME. Describing her work as an “ethnography of a body count,” Reineke’s chapter most convincingly captures the promise of this volume to explore the disquieting gaps between the material evidence of death and the ambiguous affective traces of disappearance in a methodologically innovative way. Reineke’s chapter distills the importance of this volume for medical anthropology, powerfully illustrating the potential for multidisciplinary collaboration to examine how pressing social ills are assembled, interpreted, and mobilized in a way that privileges the voices of those still searching for loved ones.

The fourth and fifth stations, “Metaphors” and “Expressions from the Living Dead,” explore how death and disappearance in the Arizona borderlands manifest in song, prayer, and the built environment. For example, Alex Nava’s discussion of desert imagery within biblical texts is placed in conversation with James S. Griffith’s account of the contested politics of roadside shrines dedicated to *La Santa Muerte*, the famous figure of death,

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unsanctioned by the Catholic Church, to whom migrants often make offerings before crossing. While the inclusion of these cultural analyses contributes to the wide range of perspectives that makes this volume so rich, I am also left wondering about what voices remain missing. The perspectives of migrants, as well as their family members, appear only sparingly in these final pages. This is an important omission that elides the ongoing work of humanitarian organizations and communities across the Americas to contradict the volume's subtitle, "*la vida no vale nada*" (life has no worth).

While some of the chapters may be theoretically dense for undergraduate audiences, *Migrant Deaths in the Arizona Desert* would be a useful addition to classes focused on undocumented migration, particularly for courses that include off-campus visits to militarized border spaces. Other potential audiences might include those with interests in designing, conducting, and publishing cross-disciplinary and mixed-methods research projects that address pressing and delicate social issues. The gaps between chapters might be filled by future work that straddles the worlds of science and technology studies, medical anthropology, and Latino studies. As a whole, however, this volume is a unique compilation of scholarship that offers an innovative format for addressing an issue of concern to many medical anthropologists.